



### Calif. test-taking case shows gap in visa security

SANTA ANA, Calif. — A ring accused of helping people from the Middle East obtain student visas by taking their proficiency exams and classes has exposed vulnerability in the nation's security tracking system for foreigners who attend U.S. schools, experts said Tuesday.

The bust unsettled immigration authorities and federal lawmakers who implemented the sophisticated Foreign Student and Exchange Visitor Information System after learning one of the Sept. 11 hijackers had entered the U.S. on a student visa.

Immigration officials have broken up similar fraud rings in recent months in Miami, Orange County, Calif., Atlanta and the Los Angeles area. All involved Korean students.

The scrutiny of foreign students once they arrive on a U.S. campus is a "serious chink in the armor" of the system, said Janice Kephart, former counsel to the 9/11 Commission and the national security policy director at the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Immigration Studies.

"Vulnerability with universities remains a top issue," she said. "It's a clean way to come into the U.S."

Federal prosecutors charged a California man Monday with operating a ring of illegal test-takers who helped dozens of Middle Eastern nationals fraudulently obtain and keep U.S. student visas in exchange for tens of thousands of dollars.

Authorities allege Eamonn Higgins, 46, and about a dozen associates helped the students stay current on their immigration paperwork by attending classes in their name, writing term papers and taking finals with guaranteed grades of 'B' or above.

***The case also alarmed Rep. Gus M. Bilirakis, a Florida Republican who became interested in the student visa tracking system after a 2007 case at the University of South Florida.***

***Bilirakis, a ranking member the House homeland security oversight and investigations subcommittee, is sponsoring a bill that would require in-person interviews of foreign students every 30 days during the school year and every 60 days during nonacademic periods.***

***"Obviously this process that we set up is not working and we have to find a better way," he said. "They have to be here for the right reasons, going to school, otherwise they should be deported."***

Officials with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement have not suggested the California ring was linked to any terrorism. Authorities have not ruled out further arrests in the ongoing investigation, said Virginia Kice, an ICE spokeswoman.

Authorities said professional test-takers allegedly used doctored driver's licenses to gain entry to exams, including a language proficiency test that foreign students from non-English speaking countries must pass to qualify for an F-1 student visa.

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Student visa fraud is an issue Gus has [long been concerned about](#) .

Last Congress, Gus introduced H.R. 4577: Student Visa Security Improvement Act which would improve the background checks conducted on student visa applicants and enhance America's ability to ensure, once in the country, foreign students are abiding by the terms of their visas.

The Act has two primary components – screening and tracking. The screening component will require DHS personnel who are assisting consular sections in the visa issuance process to review all applications for student visas prior to final adjudication. The tracking component will require more vigilant monitoring of foreign students once they are in the country by improving the Student and Exchange Visitor Program and the system that keeps track of them.